



Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccom20>

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To cite this article: Daria Khanolainen, Yulia Nesterova & Elena Semenova (2022) Indigenous education in Russia: opportunities for healing and revival of the Mari and Karelian Indigenous groups?, Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education, 52:5, 768-785, DOI: [10.1080/03057925.2020.1834350](https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2020.1834350)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2020.1834350>



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Published online: 20 Oct 2020.



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Indigenous education in Russia: opportunities for healing and revival of the Mari and Karelian Indigenous groups?

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ABSTRACT

Despite being a multicultural country throughout its history, the Russian Federation has long struggled to embrace its diversity. As a result, the country's many cultural, religious, and ethnic minority groups have been going through waves of assimilationist policies and practices. Assimilation into the Russian society enforced through formal schooling, daily life, and mass media has led to a destruction of Indigenous lifestyles, cultures, identities, and languages. This article explores the views of Russia's Indigenous people regarding the country's education system and its ability to support the cultural revival of Indigenous groups as well as the healing of the trauma that emerged from historical oppression. Within the scope of this article, we investigate the views of two Indigenous groups: Mari and Karelian peoples. Their insights show that despite the decrease in discrimination, the education system has not yet changed its assimilative tendencies.

KEYWORDS

Indigenous education;
Indigenous language;
Indigenous identity; minority
education; Russia

Introduction

In recent years, Russia's federal government has imposed a set of educational policies on republics populated by Indigenous peoples. This study examines and compares how representatives of two Indigenous groups view education available to them in their republics vis-à-vis the need for cultural revival and healing of the trauma of the past practices in what we see as a postcolonial shift in the country. We look at two republics and their Indigenous/titular nations – Mari El and Karelia. Both have a special status in Russia which is being diminished by the current federal government's actions, including cuts in financial and administrative support for minority groups and appointments of non-Indigenous governors who have no awareness of Indigenous issues in the republics.

Although the main focus of this article is formal education available in the two republics, there are important non-educational and non-formal education aspects. A brief overview of these issues helps to explain the impact of education systems on Russia's Indigenous peoples, especially given the lack of literature on the topic. Indeed, the current educational landscape in the republics cannot be viewed in isolation from the wider context of colonialism and how education 'is shaped by a range of economic and political forces' (Tikly and Bond 2013, 423).

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 Summary table for all participants: <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.12024018>

 Interview questions: <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.12662759>

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The Constitution of the Russian Federation (2008) positions the country as a multinational state with power lying in the hands of the diverse nations inhabiting it. Although today 80% of Russia's population identify as ethnically Russian, more than 190 ethnic groups, including Indigenous peoples, populate the country (FSSS 2010). Each ethnic group has distinctive history, language, customs, and traditions. A decree about Russia's small-numbered Indigenous peoples legally recognises only 47 ethnic groups as 'Indigenous minority peoples' (Government of the Russian Federation 2000). The classification is based mainly on the quantitative index with an arbitrary threshold of 50,000 people. There are ethnic groups that are considered Indigenous but are not recognised as such in the legislation as their numbers exceed the small-numbered minority threshold.

Among these groups are 24 titular nations, the term for Indigenous peoples introduced by Soviet officials who viewed the term 'Indigenous' to be inappropriate and only applicable in the context of countries with a colonial past. Soviet ideological efforts aimed at constructing the image of the country as a non-colonial power hence the terms with colonial connotations were replaced with something ideologically suitable (Donahoe et al. 2008). A titular nation implies a non-Russian ethnic group that dominates a particular geographic area that historically comprised their traditional land (Yusupova 2016). These traditional lands were named ('*titled*') after each *titular* nation and granted an official status of a republic, becoming 'the "homelands" of non-Russian minorities' (Zajda 2003, 115). For example, the Republic of Karelia is the homeland of the Karelian titular nation while the Republic of Mari-El is the homeland of the Mari titular nation. Although these groups are not qualified legally to be referred to as Indigenous in Russia due to their comparatively larger population, they maintain a traditional way of life, inhabit remote areas, and identify as distinct autochthonous ethnic, cultural, and linguistic groups aspiring to preserve their distinctive identities and traditional territories. These indicators are in line with the definition of Indigeneity put forward by Special Rapporteur on Discrimination against Indigenous Populations J. Martinez Cobo (1986) that is widely used in the international discourse on Indigenous issues and rights.

This year, Mari El and Karelia are celebrating their centenary as Republics. In view of the occasion, we deem it important to take time to reflect on the Republics' journeys of being autonomous homelands of the Mari and Karelian peoples.

Background

Russia has a long and complicated history of becoming the largest country in the world through tenacious expansion and incorporation of peoples with distinct cultures, languages, and religions. In the Soviet Union, Indigenous peoples witnessed many drastic policy shifts which have been described as a 'pendulum swinging' (Kolstø and Edemsky 1995) and the oscillation 'between the two poles of Russification and ethnophilia' (Gorenburg 2006, 27). Indeed, while some Soviet periods represented 'the most extravagant celebration of ethnic diversity that any state had ever financed' (Slezkine 1994, 414), others were dominated by ethnic cleansing, forced relocation, and harsh assimilation policies (Chankseliani 2017; Martin 1998; Romanova 2007) in attempts 'to break down the opposition to Russian Slav hegemony' and 'create a sense of unity' (Watson 2007, 256). The Soviet government contributed towards drastically changing the demographic composition of the Soviet republics by encouraging large numbers of ethnically

Russian people to relocate thus reducing titular nations to minorities in their homelands and helping the Russian language and culture become dominant throughout the country (Petersoo 2007). Nonetheless, during that time, writing systems were created for many languages which contributed to the development of Indigenous languages into modern literary languages.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the federal government aimed to unite the country through educational reform. For example, in 2018, the amendments to Law 'On Education' (Article 14, item 6) gave families living in the republics the right to 'freely choose' whether or not they want their child to study the native language of their Republic's titular nation (Government of the Russian Federation 2012). Educational institutions are now switching the language of instruction to Russian to accommodate the will of Russian parents who do not see the need in Indigenous languages and, as a dominant group, outvote Indigenous parents who would like to safeguard their languages as the medium of instruction in local schools. While the changes are presented as democratic and not imposing restrictions on Indigenous education, concerns have been voiced by titular nations about the likely effects of the amendments on the proficiency levels and preservation of their languages (Yusupova 2018).

Mari people and Mari language

Mari are Finno-Ugric people that traditionally inhabit the Middle Volga region of Russia. The majority lives in the Republic of Mari El and constitutes 43.9% of the Republic's population (FSSS 2010). Today the total number of the Mari is slightly under 600,000 people in the world. Despite being an official state language, there have been hindrances in the use of Mari in the public context (Zamyatin 2012). Although in the 1960s Mari language teaching was banned (MRGI 2018b), in 1990, to 'save the nation from assimilation' within the Russian ethnic group, activists established a non-governmental organisation 'Mari Ushem' to revitalise the Mari language and culture (Kondrashkina 2009, 111). In 1992, Mari was officially recognised as the official language in the Republic on the same level as Russian.

Today the use of Mari is limited to everyday social interaction (Mari Uver 2018). Unlike in some republics, the requirement for public officials to have a good command of all official languages of their respective republics has been annulled in Mari El although the population has a legally protected right to interact in Mari with anyone, including the local authorities (Constitution of the Republic of Mari El 1995, Article 26). Notwithstanding the 'Mari El Law on Languages' that guarantees support to Mari-language media (Government of the Republic of Mari El 1995, Articles 44, 48), in 2019, the head of the Republic ordered to issue a formerly daily newspaper 'Mari El', the largest newspaper in the Mari language since 1915, henceforth twice a month (Mari Uver 2019).

In 2001, the department for nationality affairs within the Mari El Ministry of Education responsible for minority language programmes was closed (IHF 2006). At the same time, following the federal government policy on minority languages, schools were granted the choice whether to include the Mari Language in curricular as a subject 'Mother tongue' or incorporate it as a language of instruction. Some schools considered this political development as an opportunity to reduce the number of teaching staff for

financial reasons and replace lessons of and in Mari by lessons of English or other subjects and provide all instruction exclusively in Russian. Consequently, there has been a significant decrease of students having an opportunity to study the Mari language and in Mari in schools. In fact, the proportion of students who choose to learn Mari has decreased from 17.6% in the 2011/2012 academic year to 10.5% in the 2018/2019 academic year (Gylman 2019).

Karelian people and Karelian Language

There were 60,815 Karelian people in Russia in 2010 (FSSS 2010) and the number is steadily declining (MRGI 2018a). The majority of Karelians live in the Republic of Karelia, although they now constitute only 7.4% of the Republic's population compared to 82.2% of ethnically Russian (FSSS 2010). The Karelian language belongs to the Finno-Ugric language family and has three dialects. According to the 2010 Census (FSSS 2010), only 25,065 people spoke Karelian in Russia in 2010 and all three dialects are included in the Atlas of the world's languages in danger (Moseley 2010).

'Massive repression, liquidation of traditional Karelian rural communities and establishment of Russian urban communities in the Karelian ethnic area' was ongoing until 1989 (Kurs 1994). This repression contributed to the decline of the Karelian population and the destruction of the Karelian language and culture (Williams 2020). Due to pressures to assimilate into mainstream Russian culture, public life in Karelia (administration, education, and media) is firmly centred around the Russian language, while Karelian is still striving for legal recognition. Despite being a titular nation's language, Karelian is not recognised as the second official language in the Republic. As justification, the federal government reported the absence of functional capacities of the language and the fact that Karelian is based on the Latin script unlike all other languages in Russia that are based on the Cyrillic script (Kryuchkova 2002). Today, Karelia is the only Republic in Russia with only one official language – Russian. In 2019, 523 Karelian schoolchildren studied the Karelian language as a school subject, which constitutes 0.7% of all schoolchildren in the republic (Ethnocultural Education in the Republic of Karelia 2019).

Indigenous content in education systems across the globe

Literature on Indigenous education shows that Indigenous groups across the globe are dealing with similar consequences of colonialism and legacies in education systems and beyond. Formal education available to Indigenous learners has been shown to be unsatisfactory and even damaging as schools often act as implicit and explicit 'sites of rejection of Indigenous knowledge and language' (May and Aikman 2003, 143; see also Breidlid 2013). Dominated by knowledge, values, thought, and structures of dominant, non-Indigenous groups (St. Denis 2011), schools sidelined knowledge and ways of knowing of Indigenous peoples and disregarded the need of education for Indigenous peoples to be based on ethnic integrity and Indigeneity (Gao 2001). Examples of this process include the lack of culturally sensitive curricula, textbooks, and pedagogy that would value and incorporate Indigenous cultural references and approaches, absence of educational materials on the history of oppression of Indigenous groups, inadequate teacher education that leaves teachers unequipped to engage with deep cultural diversity,

and the perpetuation of discriminatory attitudes against Indigenous learners (see Aitken and Radford 2018; Chodkiewicz, Widin, and Yasukawa 2008; May and Aikman 2003).

One consequence of such schooling is experiences of uprooting, alienation, oppression of, and discrimination against Indigenous people (Graham and Van Zyl-Chavarro 2016). Traumatic schooling experiences of Indigenous adults, for example, contribute to the distrust and disconnection between schools and families (De Plevitz 2007) and negatively affect learning processes and outcomes of Indigenous children (Kearney et al. 2014). At the same time, Indigenous parents may be reluctant to share their painful memories of schooling with their children which means that these important stories remain forever untold and wounds unhealed (Brown 2019). Another consequence is Indigenous learners hiding their Indigenous identities and reshaping themselves to assimilate into the dominant culture. For this reason, a growing number of people come to identify as Indigenous only in adulthood (Watt and Kowal 2019), if at all. Another concern is that the exclusion of Indigenous content from formal education leads Indigenous people to question the necessity to maintain their cultures and knowledge, and, ultimately, to start seeing Indigeneity as less valid and even irrelevant (Nesterova 2019).

Countries with Indigenous populations have adopted a number of approaches to strengthen Indigenous identities, revitalise Indigenous cultures, and educate Indigenous and non-Indigenous people about past injustices, their legacies and present struggles of Indigenous groups. Depending on the country, they have included anti-discrimination education (Gebhard 2018), anti-racist education (Castagno and Brayboy 2008), culturally relevant education (Kanu 2007; Castagno and Brayboy 2008; Harrington and CHiXapkaid 2013; Munns, O'Rourke, and Bodkin-Andrews 2013), multicultural education (Mason 2009), the development of inclusive school climate to promote a sense of belonging (Rahman 2013), reconciliation through education to transform divided societies (Bellino et al. 2017), and others. Yet, education of Russia's Indigenous peoples have received virtually no attention. This study aims to fill the gap and investigate what Russia's Indigenous peoples' experiences can offer in understanding education needs and pursuits of Indigenous people.

Theoretical framework

The field of comparative education has been imbued with colonial thinking from its inception with comparativists often adopting a patronising and condescending stance towards the contexts outside the Western bubble (Crossley and Tikly 2004; Sobe 2016; Takayama 2018). As a way forward from the colonial legacy in the field, Larsen and Beech (2014) call to transcend conventional lines of demarcation and reject the binary differentiation of 'the global' and 'the local' and instead, apply spatial thinking in comparative studies focusing on 'the relational conceptions of space through the analysis of networks, connections, and flows' (p. 192). Similarly, Sobe (2016) argues that comparative education requires the dialogic approach of positioning oneself 'with' and 'against' the Nation State which involves taking the local context seriously while applying denationalised global thinking.

In addition, Chankseliani (2017) highlighted that Russia has a central position in the (post-)Soviet space while also being a peripheral country in relation to the Western world. This means that non-Russian groups living in the (Post-)Soviet Space are at

a double disadvantage – they experience two layers of colonialism (Russian and Western) resulting in them being almost completely excluded from global academic thought, including those related to Indigenous issues. In this article, we bring voices of the Mari and Karelian people to the forefront and compare educational opportunities available to them in their Republics. We do this using the lens of spatial thinking and focusing on unique contexts while also drawing on the wider Indigenous scholarship outside Russia.

Furthermore, to help understand and name the persistent effects of the dominance of the Russian culture, language, truth, and values on education in formal (school) and informal (home) settings, this study adopts postcolonialism as its theoretical framework. Postcolonialism helps us understand how a dominant ethnic group legitimises its control over country's education and how its dominance shapes the country's Indigenous population's identities and development, including through education. It also helps to determine how this dominance (through its assumptions, beliefs, and logic) affects the survival of Indigenous cultures, knowledge, and languages. For example, it aids the process of uncovering (1) how the education system silences other ways of knowing, learning, expressing oneself, and being, and (2) how imbalanced relationships and arrangements affect Indigenous people's self-confidence and sense of self-worth as well as social cohesion and inter-group relationships (see Gandhi 2019; Young 2003).

Postcolonialism has another role and that is of education's potential as a site of resistance to and disruption of assimilation and mental colonisation. As Young (2003, 2) stated, 'postcolonialism claims the right of all people on this earth to the same material and culture well-being'. This, of course, includes the right of Indigenous people to their cultural well-being within and beyond the education system. However, as colonial relationships – including within education – continue to order and re-order the hierarchies of knowledges, discourses, languages, and ethnic identities (see Crossley and Tikly 2004; Hickling-Hudson, Matthews, and Woods 2004), it is hard to move beyond such power dynamics unless we unpack what they are and how they affect lives in different and diverse local contexts.

Russia's Indigenous learners are assimilated into the hegemonic education system and, as such, inculcated into the culture, values, discourses, and knowledge system of the dominant ethnic group (Nasibullov and Kopylova 2020). This is done at the expense of their own languages and cultures that are viewed as primitive and irrelevant for the country's development. Demeaning views of minority cultures are important to maintain to justify the authority of the dominant group to teach minority groups 'how to live appropriate, enlightened lives' (Viruru and Persky 2019). Postcolonialism helps us see that the dominant groups often construct their 'civilising mission' in terms of an economic growth and material prosperity while posing as concerned older siblings who know best (Preece, Modise, and Mosweunyane 2008, 270). Their real priorities, however, lie with making 'populations economically useful and politically docile in relation to dominant global interests' (Tikly 2004, 174).

Moreover, when dominant groups enforce exclusionary curricula, it is often presented as a natural and inevitable process that 'seems to happen organically, without intent, even though Indigenous erasure is the arch aim of settler colonialism' (Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández 2013, 79). In doing so, education systems recreate colonialism long after countries abandon their colonial status (MacNaughton and Davis 2001; Borrero et al. 2012). Dismissing Indigenous ways of knowing constitutes 'epistemological racism' which 'may be considered one of the most dangerous forms of racism in existence today' (Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson 2016, 793). Challenging ideas that 'shape pedagogical process,

particularly as they relate to epistemological perspectives (the points from which information is shared) will, in most cases, no doubt, be viewed as negative and disruptive' (hooks 2014, 184). However, to facilitate a meaningful learning process it is important to see all learners as individuals and to open the educational setting to different ways of thinking (hooks 2014).

Method

This is an exploratory qualitative study that compares how two Indigenous groups in Russia perceive formal and informal opportunities to learn their respective languages, cultures, histories, traditions, and other such aspects of their ethnic identities. It was conducted to collect a wide range of views within the two groups employing purposive sampling and selecting information-rich cases (Patton 2002). Over the course of a multi-stage sampling process, we employed two purposive strategies: 1) maximum variation sampling (ensuring heterogeneity of ages, levels of education, occupations and levels of involvement in Indigenous issues) and 2) snowball sampling. The choice of these strategies was determined by small population numbers in the two Indigenous groups selected for this study and their complex contexts. Among the two groups, people who spoke their respective Indigenous language represented the majority of the participants compared to those who did not.

Karelian people were contacted and recruited through the website called VKontakte (VK) – the most popular social media website in the Russian Federation (460 million users at the moment of our data collection). We posted a series of online advertisements to the biggest VK communities organised by Karelian people for Karelian people. Ten Karelians participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews. We organised a similar social media call for Mari people. Unlike Karelians, however, some Mari people regarded it with an air of wariness and only a few volunteered to participate. Those who were reluctant to participate shared the feelings of bruised pride at being called 'the minority nation' as they inhabit their traditional lands. Indeed, in Russian, the word 'minority' has a negative connotation. At the same time, this group is significantly larger in numbers than Karelians and therefore easier to find participants. One researcher of this study being a Mari herself used her connections to invite Mari participants. Once she found a couple through her own network, the snowballing strategy helped recruit more participants. Overall, 10 Mari people participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews.

All data were collected (audio-recorded with their consent), transcribed, coded, and analysed with the use of a qualitative content analysis approach and ATLAS.ti 8. Mari and Karelian participants have pseudonyms starting with letters M and K, respectively.

Results

When asked about where their knowledge about their Indigenous identities, cultures, histories, traditions, and languages came from, almost all participants talked about fragmented and unsystematic learning at home and school. Mari people had more opportunities for such learning both at home and at school: nine Mari participants reported gaining some Indigenous knowledge at home and eight at school compared to only four Karelian participants who engaged in learning at home and five who had a chance to acquire such knowledge at school. One Mari and four Karelian participants

(Malika, Kathrin, Kyle, Kallista, Katelyn) stated that they did not learn anything about their Indigeneity and had no cultural learning at home.

My parents never spoke of their ethnicity. I found out about it in high school when I started researching my family's history and tracing where everyone was from. That was the moment when I found out everything and became interested in learning about Karelian culture and language. (...) I was trying to find myself in high school and I tried myself in so many things. Exactly at that time the city started offering free Karelian language courses and I was a passionate learner eager to learn everything, so I joined those courses too. (Katelyn, 21)

My relatives hardly ever spoke about these things [the history and culture of Karelian people]. For some reason my grandfather shares very little in this regard. He himself speaks Karelian fluently but he never tried to teach any of us to speak the language. (Kathrin, 30)

Karelians (Karina, Kathrin, Kyle, Kendrick, Katelyn) also reported having fewer formal educational opportunities to learn about their culture and/or master their language despite actively seeking such opportunities. For example, in Kyle's experience:

School literally taught me nothing related to Karelians. There was not even a trace of Indigenous education. Literary nothing. (...). I was always eager to learn more than what our school was offering. I was always searching for new sources. School had no influence on me. But even at that age I knew my ethnicity and I saw my future clearly and I knew that I will pass down my knowledge to my children and will try to spread the word about Karelians further. I knew it then, but I had no one who would support me. (Kyle, 29)

Even though Mari participants had more opportunities for Indigenous learning at school than Karelians, some of them did not feel like they learned what they were supposed to during their Mari lessons seeing them as a mere formality. As Marpa and Malika shared, Mari lessons were either used to prepare for more 'important' subjects or were not taken seriously enough to establish orderly atmosphere in the classroom.

It might seem strange, but we didn't have a single lesson about the Mari culture at school. I am not sure if it is OK to reveal this but honestly, we had Mari lessons only on paper. I do have an A for the Mari culture in my high school diploma but in reality, we had algebra during Mari lessons and we were preparing for exams. (Marpa, 23)

We had a difficult situation at school because half of Mari students did not speak the language at all ... And for some reason, everyone hated our Mari teacher. It was just horrible but probably everyone had something similar. Our Mari lessons were all a big mess. Nobody listened to anyone and everyone was fighting with one another ... (Malika, 28)

Trying to explain the lack of Indigenous content in formal and informal education, five Karelian (Karen, Kyle, Katelyn, Kandyce, Kelly) and three Mari participants (Mitri, Maira, Malika) spoke of the historical oppression of their groups inflicted by the Soviet government. Oppressive practices such as extermination and forced migration shaped how Indigeneity was perceived in the country by Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples which led Indigenous groups to feel shame and embarrassment for their ethnicity pushing them to seek assimilation into the dominant culture. Abandoning their own culture was seen as the only way to stop discrimination against their people. The participants described how the sense of shame was influencing educational decisions of their groups:

We had a period when people were very ashamed of being Karelian. I was told that back then [under the Soviet regime] if you spoke Karelian, people viewed you as a peasant. Even if both parents were Karelian, they would only speak Russian so that their children would not learn any Karelian. That was done in order to prevent the oppression of children. One Karelian woman once told me that as children they were punished if anyone heard them speak Karelian. (Katelyn, 21)

At school, our class group was all Mari and we felt contempt from the Russian groups. I remember they called us cheremis and also farm girls and boys. It was in the 80s. That was real mistreatment . . . so when I later moved to a city and entered university we tried to speak only Russian because it was embarrassing to speak Mari. (Maira, 47)

Due to the internalised oppression and shame, Indigenous groups did not insist on education policies and/or formal and informal spaces that would sustain their languages, cultures, and traditions. If anything, Indigenous people were relieved that Indigenous lessons were not provided in schools. As a Mari participant pointed out:

It was so uncool [to be Mari] so our class group [made of predominantly Mari students] was very happy that we did not have to have any Indigenous lessons (. . .). (Marpa, 23).

This shame extended not only into educational preferences but also into how Indigenous students interacted with their Russian peers. Fitting in was more important than learning about their people, and assimilation was performed not simply by adopting the Russian language and cultural references, but also by voicing one's belonging to the ethnically Russian group while downplaying any Indigenous roots. As Marpa, 23, shared:

If one of your parents was Russian and the other was Mari, then you would stress that "I am Russian cause my mother is Russian". The Russian side was always emphasised while the Mari side was concealed (. . .).

Compared to the past treatment Indigenous people received, they do not feel oppressed in modern Russia, at least in terms of acceptance of Indigenous identities, cultures, and languages.

That time has passed, thankfully. Nowadays, even if we are in a city among other ethnic groups, we can proudly speak Mari. (Maira, 47)

Things are a little better now. Back then, it was impossible to speak your language. Nobody would speak Mari then but now it is totally normal to see random guys on the street who speak Mari and it is so wonderful! (Malika, 28)

It is also evident that the situation for minorities has improved as only older participants referred to their own experiences of active discrimination in the past while younger people mostly spoke of experiences of others. In view of this overall improvement, the sense of shame is lifting and the educational needs and wants are gradually changing. The theme of gradually coming to embrace and value one's own culture and identity, and developing a genuine interest in learning more about it was expressed by eleven participants (Miklai, Marpa, Mary, Malika, Marshan, Kenneth, Kathrin, Kyle, Katelyn, Kandyce, Kelly).

[Knowing and understanding the Karelian culture] is important to me. I don't know the reason for this but the older I get, the more I see that understanding this is important to me as well as knowing where I am, who I am and who my ancestors were. (Kenneth, 31)

When I was in high school, I decided to learn [my culture and language] by myself as I became fully conscious of them. I started working on this but it was very hard. I was contemplating the possibility of learning the language via Skype but did not know who to approach about this. (Malika, 28)

Reflecting on their learning experiences and acknowledging their fragmented knowledge of Indigenous cultures, traditions, histories, and languages helped participants start a conversation about their current educational needs. Seven participants (Marina, Mary, Malika, Karen, Karina, Kathrin, Kyle) wished they knew more about their culture and people. Despite the current shifts towards a more positive perception of Indigeneity by Indigenous people and the wider society, seven participants, six of which were Karelian (Miklai, Karen, Kathrin, Kyle, Kallista, Kendrick, Katelyn), noted the slow pace of changes. They thus felt pessimistic about the future of their cultures and languages. Pessimism was partly connected to the perceived inapplicability of Indigenous cultures in the modern world. Half of the Karelian and two Mari participants (Minklai, Maira, Karina, Kenneth, Kendrick, Katelyn, Kandyce) highlighted that either they themselves or other people within their group did not see Indigenous cultures and languages as valuable and relevant today which had a negative impact on their motivation to discover and learn more. For example, the participants shared the following views on the need to teach their languages at school and beyond:

Well, I remember one day our university started offering Karelian language courses free of charge but then I decided not to participate because I thought "why should I learn this language that I cannot use anywhere?" Nevertheless, my mother and sister joined that course. (Karina, 29)

Most people do not need this language any more. If only this language was as necessary as English which you can use all over the world and you have this understanding that without speaking English, you are nobody in this world ... But Karelian, where can you use it? Even here, in Karelia, if you try to speak it people won't understand you, they would just find you funny. (Kandyce, 29)

I work at school and I often see parents come to us and ask if it is actually necessary to teach Mari in high school and if it is possible to replace this subject with something more important. They ask this question to show that this subject is unnecessary and wastes their children's time. (Maira, 47)

Still, eleven participants (Miklai, Marpa, Marianna, Marina, Mary, Maira, Marshan, Malika, Kathrin, Kendrick, Katelyn) called for the need to incorporate a wide range of Indigenous issues in school curricula as family members who survived the period of oppression understandably did not want to have conversations about the history, culture, and other related issues. A Karelian participant explained it as follows:

It is necessary to teach this [the Karelian language and culture] at school because it is so easy to lose this knowledge. Our elders are not passing down this knowledge. They survived the war which makes them want to forget everything [associated with that period]. But children can't just start learning on their own. They need to be encouraged and supported to learn this. (Kathrin, 30)

Eight Mari participants pointed out that the Mari language and culture should be taught as a compulsory subject while two Mari participants (Mitri and Mamich) preferred it for Mari classes to be offered as an elective. They all shared the feeling of unhappiness that the Mari people learn more about the Russian history and culture than about their own.

[Mari lessons] are important because they are about the people around you. Their history is so important. It pisses me off that people know everything about the Russian empire but they know nothing about their own region. (Malika, 28)

In contrast, only three Karelians (Kathrin, Kendrick, Katelyn) spoke in favour of the Karelian language and culture being a compulsory subject in Karelian schools. The others, however, stressed that forcing people to learn is counterproductive and what is more effective is creating real learning opportunities, such as additional and accessible educational institutions, and better learning materials. Kyle and Kelly shared the following ideas regarding what is needed in terms of Indigenous education and noted that there is a clear demand and enthusiasm for such opportunities.

It is important to give people real opportunities so that they could learn if they want to. (...) There are fifty schools here and only one offers Karelian language classes ... Schools like that should open in every district ... When the city library started offering Karelian language courses, the hall was packed, not a single seat was left. People were prepared to stand in the corridor. I mean, there is so much enthusiasm but things are poorly organised. (Kyle, 29)

The school [that offers Karelian classes] is far away for many families meaning that parents would have to drive their children to that school. They would love their children to learn Karelian but it is simply not an option for them to drive their children from their suburban home to the downtown. (Kelly, 41)

Even though almost half of the participants (nine out of twenty) argued in favour of non-compulsory Indigenous education, all participants agreed that the school curricula in the Republics still need to have small Indigenous components introducing all school children to local culture and history. Stressing the need for Indigenous content for non-Indigenous learners, 13 participants (Miklai, Marianna, Mary, Marshan, Malika, Karen, Kathrin, Kyle, Kallista, Kendrick, Katelyn, Kandyce, Kelly) described how ignorant Russian people can be in regards to Indigenous groups. Their examples highlighted a systematic neglect of teaching the population of a multicultural country about the multiple cultures that inhabit it, and, hence, the lack of understanding of their struggles. Two Mari and two Karelian participants (Marpa, Malika, Katelyn, Kandyce) stressed that basic learning is needed to learn to respect Indigenous people and their land.

Actually, it is an Indigenous land here. I understand it could be hard [learning about Mari people and their culture] but I want to say this – learning these things means paying respect to the place where you live. (Malika, 28)

Supplementary materials provide further details on the educational backgrounds and current needs of the participants.

Discussion

This study identified three elements to better understand Indigenous education in Russia. First, while Mari people had formal and informal educational opportunities to learn about their culture, identity, history, traditions, and to transmit the language than Karelian people, both groups' education about their Indigenous roots and related matters was fragmented and unsystematic, both at home and in school. While some Mari and Karelian people sought opportunities to learn about their respective groups, the majority felt relieved that they did not have to address, discuss and reveal, what was at the time, a stigmatised and shamed Indigenous identity that led to discrimination. Many chose to abandon their roots, cultures, and languages to assimilate into the dominant society in order not to stand out.

Second, as oppression of or discrimination against Indigenous cultures and peoples decreased significantly, educational needs and wants of Indigenous people have changed drastically. Now, many reportedly value and embrace their cultures, identities, and languages, and wish for more educational opportunities to strengthen and promote those. Yet, the slow pace of positive changes within the education system and the wider society, as well as perceived inapplicability and irrelevance of anything Indigenous, cause pessimism for the future of Indigenous groups. Third, the participants still believe in the importance of incorporating Indigenous material in school curricular to encourage and support children's learning about their roots, histories, and cultures. They also believe that such education should be extended to include majority population so that they could understand Indigenous cultures and the need to protect them.

What is learnt from comparing these groups is that even within the same country different Indigenous groups can have significantly different opportunities for Indigenous learning. It appears that these opportunities relate to the number and relative percentage of Russians residing in the region, which ultimately defined the level of the Russian dominance. Karelian, the much smaller group, reported less engagement in Indigenous learning and a more pessimistic outlook on the future of their culture. Comparing these groups also revealed that they share an increasing personal interest in seeing their people heal and their cultures revive.

These insights highlighted many striking similarities between the situation in Russia and other post-colonial contexts. Similarly to other countries, past struggles that emerged due to the dominance of one ethnic group, and the resulting traumatic legacy, are shaping the identity and educational needs of people of Indigenous descent in Russia today. Historical trauma is particularly evident in experiences of the two groups, although the participants expressed mixed feelings about the Soviet past. While Karelians see the early Soviet period as the darkest chapter of their history, they associate later Soviet times with equal opportunities. At the same time, the Mari participants noted that their culture and language were consistently undermined throughout the Soviet period. What they have in common, however, is that despite not feeling oppressed in modern Russia, they feel that more support is needed to remediate the damage done in the past and redress its legacies.

Currently, the Russian education system offers few opportunities for such redress or for the revival of Indigenous cultures. This lack of opportunities for a faster and more meaningful change is mostly seen by the participants as unintentional and even as something

that their ethnic groups brought on themselves with their inability to stand up for themselves and demand change. These perceptions have been gradually conditioned. First, people view today's situation in contrast to the past atrocities: after all, now the situation is comparatively better. Second, the current federal government makes just enough effort towards supporting Indigenous groups to appear well meaning. This resembles half-hearted attempts to support Indigenous people leading to the 'accidental' erasure of their cultures in other postcolonial contexts (Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández 2013).

Studying the Russian context revealed similar patterns of oppressive mechanisms against Indigenous people as those that were reported in research in other countries. The participants who grew up in mixed and Russian communities either did not know they had Indigenous ancestry when they were young or shared experiences of 'epistemological racism' (Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson 2016) and of being 'Othered' (Petersoo 2007; Borrero et al. 2012; Gandhi 2019). This left a lasting mark on some participants and/or their relatives, friends, and community members manifesting itself through shame for their origins and the internalised perception of their culture as irrelevant and dispensable. These experiences at a younger age pressured Mari and Karelian people into striving towards seemingly voluntary assimilation (Viruru and Persky 2019) which they now acknowledge and counter with a newfound interest in the history and culture of their respective group.

Younger people particularly stressed their sadness about not having opportunities as children to connect to their heritage culture and their longing to find their cultural roots as adults which also resembles experiences of Indigenous people in other postcolonial countries (Watt and Kowal 2019). Notably, the participants who grew up in their own ethnic communities spoke of different experiences. As children, they had more opportunities to engage in Indigenous education at home and at school, and often saw their ethnicity as something to be proud of. However, these communities have been radically reduced over the past 20 years, making it almost certain that the new generations of Indigenous people will grow up as part of Russian and mixed communities.

After examining the similarities with other Indigenous groups outside Russia, it is important to discuss a key difference: none of the participants saw themselves or their group at a greater risk for educational underachievement compared to the dominant group. However, additional research is needed to investigate the issue further, especially because of underachievement reported in other countries (Bania, Eckhoff, and Kvernmo 2015; Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson 2016). Nevertheless, the participants did share that they had to trade their Indigenous culture and identity for academic access, success and later economic stability. Similarly to Tikly's (2004) work that highlighted dominant group's prioritisation of economic usefulness, some participants opted to abandon learning about their Indigeneity to study subjects that would be 'more important' for their economic advancement in the mainstream society, while the ethnically Russian group never had to abandon their culture to be better students as the whole education system is built around their values, knowledge, and other cultural references.

These findings have important implications for the current education system in Russia. Past wrongdoings and their legacy need to be publicly acknowledged and critically discussed with children and their families as the first step towards reconciliation between the dominant and minority groups (Bellino et al. 2017). To ensure reconciliation and sustainable development of Indigenous communities and their

cultures, it is important to help Indigenous *and* non-Indigenous people to see Indigeneity as something to be proud of and Indigenous languages and cultures as relevant and valuable. Overcoming the vestiges of colonial heritage requires a substantial amount of dedicated effort. However, this effort will bring changes required to build an equitable and inclusive education system. In particular, for Indigenous people, this would foster their intrinsic motivation for meaningful learning and strengthen their confidence and dignity. Not being able to learn at home has to be compensated for at school where inclusive climate and culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy can empower all students to see themselves as equal and feel like they belong (Rahman 2013; Kanu 2007; Harrington and CHiXapkaid 2013; Munns, O'Rourke, and Bodkin-Andrews 2013). For non-Indigenous people, this will be a step towards redress and development of a multicultural state where Indigenous peoples are accepted as equal, and to challenge and eradicate ethnic arrogance and hegemony.

Acknowledgments

The work was performed under the auspices of the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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